

ON PAGE

44

NEWSWEEK  
12 August 1985

## INTERNATIONAL

# Mexico: Where 'La Mordida' Is King

Corruption and bribery on a massive scale frustrate de la Madrid's campaign for 'moral renovation.'

By ROD NORDLAND

\*\*\*\*\*

*The pressures within Mexico have led to a rise in political unrest, mostly along the border. Matamoros is one of those border towns the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has lost to opposition parties, although recently it won back the municipal government—with the usual allegations of electoral fraud. Worried by the earlier defeat, the PRI has tried to make the town a model of good government.*

I went to Matamoros looking for the new mayor, but first I found a man reputed by U.S. police to be a mobster—by his own account, merely a restaurateur. At a fiesta by the river outside town was Juan N. Guerra, or just "Juan N." to locals who seem to cringe at the name. Not long before,

the town's other alleged gang boss, Casimiro (El Cacho) Espinosa, was wounded by a would-be assassin and hospitalized. Then a dozen or so gunmen pulled up in front of the hospital in an armored car and with automatic rifles and grenades tore through the hospital, killing seven, including El Cacho and his sister. Juan N. was blasé about the incident. "El Cacho earned fame by dying," the silver-haired old man said smoothly as a gaggle of his *pistoleros* crowded around. "He talked a lot but he paid with his life."

Juan N.'s nephew Jesús Roberto Guerra—the mayor of Matamoros—was at the fiesta. The mayor explained how the PRI had been stung by its earlier electoral defeat in his town and had decided to pick a dark-horse reformer like himself. "It was difficult for the party to choose me," he said, "but they needed somebody who didn't have to steal. I'm already rich."

Could the opposition do any better? The National Action Party (PAN) has made its reputation campaigning against corruption in government. PAN's Rubén Rubiano in Matamoros says corruption in Mexico will end the day voters turn PRI out and put PAN in. But Rubiano was seriously embarrassed by his opponents, who point out that he is ineligible for office because he actually lives in Brownsville, Texas. He is hard put to deny what everyone in town knows to be true. "This is like having a drunk calling someone else a drunk," he says. "Many PRI officials have property in the United States."

Despite predictions that the PRI might for the first time lose the governorships of Sonora and Nuevo León states, they claimed landslide victories last month. Their PAN opponents said the size of the vote margins could only have come through fraud. One PRI official announced his party's victory before the polls even closed. "The PRI is afraid that if they allow any opposition victory, the whole edifice will crack," said PAN official Norberto Corella in Hermosillo, capital of Sonora state.

*A controversial CIA study called Mexico the leading long-term, foreign-policy concern of the United States because of the likelihood of widespread social turmoil. President de la Madrid bristles at such suggestions. "Mexico's stability has been proven for many years—for more than six decades," he said. Even its current "profound economic crisis" is actually proof that the country "has been able to react to its problems and ... overcome its difficulties."*

Those difficulties are indeed profound. The National Nutrition Institute says at least 40 percent of Mexicans are malnourished and 100,000 of the 2 million children born every year die from diseases associated with hunger. One million will have physical and mental defects from poor diet. Not long ago, Mexico actually exported food. Now it is no longer able even to produce enough corn and beans for its own needs. Part of the problem is a galloping population growth rate of 2.3 percent a year, which means that

in 30 years the population will double. "That means in another 30 years we will have to create another Mexico," says Adrial Ayuz of MexFam, a family-planning group. Already the country needs another 1 million jobs for people who are coming of age every year.

It doesn't have them, and as a result, a thousand people, mostly poor peasants, arrive in Mexico City each day. The city now contains nearly a quarter of all Mexicans, and its 17 million population is growing so fast that soon it will surpass Tokyo as the world's largest city. Former President López Portillo called his capital "the most absurd thing that ever happened." The current police chief, General Mota, refers to it as a "decomposing society."

*Such enormous problems leave many outsiders less sanguine about Mexico's stability than its leaders. "I don't think it'll happen right away," said one Western ambassador, "but one of these days ... the bubble's going to burst and I can't help thinking that in 15 or 20 years there could be [a revolution]."*

The question of whether another revolution is possible in Mexico drew me to the town of Cuautla in Morelos state. It's a vintage Mexican place: streets that run like a dusty argument between facing white masonry walls guarding houses with hidden gardens. This was a stronghold of Emiliano Zapata, the peasant leader and land-reform advocate of the Mexican revolution. Zapata's ideals are kept alive by a group of elderly followers who meet once in a while at a hall here, wearing ragged baggy pants, wide-sombreros and long mustaches. Only youth, and crossed gun belts, seem to be missing.

Fortino Cárdenas Romero, 84, fought as a second captain with Zapata. He was a landless peasant then; now he is a landed peasant, but just as poor. "The revolution was converted into a revolution for the rich and not for the poor," he said. Will there be another revolution in Mexico? "Many young people ask me that," said Cárdenas. "I say, we would need another Zapata, but there are no leaders like this in Mexico today. They are all out for themselves."

Continued

2

*The border with the United States is one of the main social and economic outlets open to Mexico. Last year U.S. immigration officers expelled 1.2 million Mexicans. Hundreds of thousands of others migrate back and forth across the border for seasonal work without being caught. "The border certainly is a safety valve," said Ambassador Gavin. "A lot of the best labor goes up there, the hard drivers who really want to work." And, he conceded, the ones who without the border option would be most likely to stir up trouble at home. Legally or illegally some 10 million Mexicans now live north of the border.*

It is evening near Tijuana's Colonia Libertad neighborhood, the single biggest crossing point for illegal immigrants to the United States. Labyrinthine paths crisscross the hills and gullies, and U.S. helicopters patrol in plain view. This evening there are a thousand men about to sneak across the border, just in this one place. Typically, half will make it. Many make this trip reluctantly. But Angel, a peasant who was expelled the day before after three years in the States, is determined to go back north. "There are no frontiers for hunger," he tells me. "You have the right to look for opportunity wherever you can."